Gulliver’s Travels | Summary

At its simplest level, *Gulliver's Travels* is the story of Lemuel Gulliver and his voyages around the world. Prefaced by two letters attesting to the truth of the tales, the adventures are told by Gulliver after his return home from his final journey. *Gulliver's Travels* is divided into four Parts or Books, each about a different place. Because of this structure, the book as a whole has a very sketchy plot; it feels more like weekly episodes than one long narrative. The individual books also feel very choppy, since Gulliver has a habit of stumbling from one adventure or crisis to the next. The book seems more cohesive if readers recognize that each part reflects Gulliver's character and is related to all the other parts. For example, Part I discusses things being disproportionately small, and Part II discusses things being disproportionately large.

**Part I: A Voyage to Lilliput** Part I, entitled "A Voyage to Lilliput," is the most famous section of *Gulliver's Travels*. Lured by the prospect of adventure and easy money, Lemuel Gulliver signs up as a "surgeon," or ship's doctor, for a voyage through the East Indies in Asia. Unfortunately for Gulliver, he is shipwrecked. He swims to an unfamiliar shore and, exhausted by his efforts, goes to sleep. When he awakes, he finds himself tied up by a crowd of extremely tiny and well-armed people. Gulliver is taken prisoner, shipped to the capital, and presented to the Emperor. A cross between court pet and circus attraction, Gulliver makes friends with many of the courtiers and learns about the history, society, politics, and economy of Lilliput. For many years, Lilliput has been at war with its sister island Blefuscu over whether to break soft-boiled eggs at the big or little end. This clash parodies the French-English and Catholic-Protestant conflicts of Swift's time, and many of the characters in this section correspond to actual political figures of the day.

Although he aids Lilliput by stealing the Blefuscidian navy, Gulliver is resented by many of the Emperor's courtiers. He eventually hears of a plot to accuse him of treason and sentence him to be blinded and starved to death. Frightened by this prospect, he swims over to Blefuscu and presents himself as a visitor from the Lilliputian emperor. The Blefuscidian emperor treats him well, even after a message from Lilliput demands his return. An Englishman-sized rowboat washes up on shore, however, and, taking advantage of the opportunity, Gulliver departs Blefuscu and Lilliput. He is eventually rescued by a passing English ship and returns home to England and his family.
Part 2: A Voyage to Brobdingnag  
Gulliver is only home two months when he sets out on Part II, "A Voyage to Brobdingnag." After encountering a terrible storm, Gulliver's ship puts in to another unfamiliar shore for much-needed food and water. He goes ashore with the landing party but is abandoned by the crew when they discover there are giants living there. Gulliver is captured by a farmer, who displays him as a circus wonder at local fairs. The farmer's daughter, Glumdalclitch, teaches Gulliver to speak the language and the two become good friends. Eventually, the farmer sells Gulliver to the Queen of Brobdingnag, who allows Glumdalclitch to join the court as Gulliver's keeper.

Once at court, Gulliver has a series of violent, physical misadventures because of his size. Once, he is taken into the country and allowed to walk around a meadow on his own. Poor Gulliver has not yet learned the limits of his size in Brobdingnag, however. As he reports, "There was a Cowdung in the Path, and I must needs try my Activity by attempting to leap over it. I took a Run, but unfortunately jumped short, and found myself just in the Middle up to my Knees." Gulliver spends most of his time discussing history, politics, philosophy, and economics with the King. The King frequently dismays Gulliver by displaying his "ignorance," that is, finding certain aspects of Gulliver's England repulsive. When Gulliver offers to teach him about gunpowder so he can rule over his subjects with force, for example, the King rejects him in horror. In the end, Gulliver is carried off by a giant bird and dropped into the sea, where he is rescued again by an English ship. Disoriented by the size of things on shipboard and then in England, Gulliver takes some time to adjust to people of his own size. Eventually he gets used to other English people again and resolves to stay at home for the rest of his life.

Part 3: A Voyage to Laputa, Balnibarbi, Glubbdubdrib, Luggnag, and Japan  
As usual, however, Gulliver is unable to keep his resolution. He is tempted by the prospect of easy money yet again and embarks on Part III, "A Voyage to Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnag, Glubbdubdrib, and Japan." Gulliver's misfortunes begin when he and his crew are seized by pirates, who abandon him alone on a deserted island. In despair, Gulliver begins to make the best of his bad lot when he is astonished to see a giant floating island appear in the sky. The inhabitants carry him up to them and make him welcome on the island, which they call Laputa. The Laputans control a nonfloating island named Balnibarbi and live entirely by the rules of science and mathematics: even their bread and meat are carved into geometric shapes. The men are so consumed in thought that they have servants, called flappers, to bring them out of a trance into conversation.
Women, who are excluded from these activities and entirely ignored by the men, frequently try to escape to Balnibarbi. After some persuasion, Gulliver is allowed to descend to Balnibarbi, where he witnesses the destructive effects of not enough practical thinking on agriculture, economics, education, and architecture.

In the most famous section of Part III, Gulliver visits the Grand Academy, Swift's parody of London's Royal Society. There he meets men devoting their lives to absurd experiments such as extracting sunlight from cucumbers and turning human waste into its original components. Gulliver proceeds from Balnibarbi to Luggnag via the island of Glubbdubdrib, which is run by magic. There the governor raises several historical leaders and philosophers from the dead, giving Gulliver a chance to wonder at the corruption and brutishness of these supposedly great men. In Luggnag, Gulliver hears of a race of people called Struldbruggs, who live forever. Gulliver imagines what he would do if he were a Struldbrugg, but when he meets them he realizes that eternal life does not necessarily mean eternal youth. The Struldbruggs actually have both infinite age and infinite infirmity, and they are miserable, senile people. Disgusted with all he has learned about himself and different ways of thinking, Gulliver sets sail for Japan, where he catches a ship for Amsterdam and returns home.

**Part 4 Summary: A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhms** Gulliver's last voyage, Part IV, is called "A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhms" (pronounced whin-hims). Part IV examines less what humanity creates, such as science or gunpowder or government, and more what humanity is. Appropriately, Gulliver is left on an alien shore by a mutiny, a betrayal and abandonment that sets in motion the wheels of Gulliver's detachment from his own people. He encounters two types of inhabitants: the rational Houyhnhms and the vicious, crude Yahoos. The Houyhnhms are talking horses who have established a society based on reason rather than emotion, while the Yahoos are hairy humanoids who are used by the Houyhnhms as slaves. As usual, Gulliver learns the language and converses with the inhabitants about society, government, history, and philosophy. The Houyhnhms do not know deceit, lying, or other vices, and are governed by reason. Neither, however, do they know fairness or love: certain color Houyhnhms are restricted to a servant class and the race as a whole has no great attachment for spouses or children. Gulliver comes to admire the Houyhnhms and loathe the Yahoos, who really are quite disgusting and violent.

Soon Gulliver is unable to appreciate the difference between humans and Yahoos:
When I thought of my Family, my Friends, my Countrymen, or human Race in general, I considered them as they really were, Yahoos in shape and Disposition, perhaps a little bit more civilized, and qualified with the Gift of Speech; but making no other Use of Reason, than to improve and multiply those Vices, whereof their Brethren in this Country had only the Share that Nature allotted them. When I happened to behold the Reflection of my own Form in a Lake or Fountain, I turned away my Face in Horror and detestation of my self; and could better endure the Sight of a common Yahoo, than of my own Person. By conversing with the Houyhnhms, and looking upon them with Delight, I fell to imitate their Gait and Gesture, which is now grown into a Habit; and my Friends often tell me in a blunt Way, that I "trot like a Horse"; which, however, I take for a great Compliment: Neither shall I disown, that in speaking I am apt to fall into the Voice and manner of the Houyhnhms, and hear my self ridiculed on that account without the least Mortification.

The Houyhnhms also have difficulty distinguishing Gulliver from the Yahoos, however. In spite of his best efforts to learn to be like the Houyhnhms, they eventually find Gulliver too much like a Yahoo and sentence him to exile. Devastated, Gulliver builds a boat and sets sail. Long after his rescue by a Portuguese ship and return home, Gulliver consistently expresses his deep hatred for humanity, whom he calls Yahoos. Part IV concludes with Gulliver very slowly learning to accept his wife, his family, and other humans again, but still full of self-hatred and misanthropy.